

Title: Political Jazz Narratives: The Propagandist Role of Big Band and Bebop in Post-WWII Soviet Animation

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From the end of WWII, jazz resounded in Soviet animated ‘moral fables’ as the target of propaganda par excellence. A metaphoric embodiment of capitalist culture, jazz enacted Marxist conceptions of capitalism’s economic interruptions, financial excess, and cultural transience. This genre of state-regulated animation increasingly portrayed jazz as an arbitrary form of American imperialism that threatened to infiltrate the Soviet Union’s seeming political stability. Ironically, the cultural establishment’s constant invocation of jazz in animation over the next twenty years betrayed its own enduring dependency on this music as a clearcut ideological opposition to prescribed Socialist Realist artistic norms of aesthetic harmony.

In this paper we examine instances of jazz’s political exploitation in Soviet animation from the late 1940s through the 1960s, a time when both jazz ambassadors of the American government and Russian musicians were mobilizing jazz politically. The animated fables in question ‘matured’ during this period, adopting more adult-oriented scripts that, like Soviet literature, prescribed narratives of Soviet resistance to American cultural imperialism. In these films, jazz emerged as a problematic ideological tool (deployed by socialist and capitalist camps alike) with an erratic dynamic of reception, deployment, and ultimately censorship. We unpack its role as: an addictive cultural narcotic that disrupts the timeless socialist idyll by contorting individual voices and bodies (*Someone Else’s Voice*, 1949); an accomplice to global material consumerism (*Familiar Images*, 1957); and a structural homology to capitalist labor division and urban social alienation (*The Shareholder*, 1963). Relying on semiotic readings of scripts, formal musicological analysis of big band/bebop citation, and art historical examination of a modernist and therefore transgressive intercut montage aesthetic, we argue that jazz transformed from a musical style into a communicative device of propaganda narrative, a refreshing but also dangerous jolting method of confronting capitalism.

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